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DECOLONIZING THE MIND OF THE OPPRESSED: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NGUGI WA THIONG'O AND PAULO FREIRE

Russell Al Farabi

Research Scholar, Ramakrishna Mission Sikshanamandira, Belurmath.

Abstract

Knowledge is power - this insight is at least four centuries old, formulated by philosopher Francis Bacon during the Enlightenment. His statement has lost nothing in terms of relevance and significance: Knowledge is power, and education is the fundamental precondition for political development, democracy and social justice. This paper explores how African writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o establishes the relationship between the language and power in the process of decolonising the mind. On the other hand, Freire"s generative themes is a student centered system of learning that challenges how knowledge is constructed in the formal education system and in society at large. Freire's student centered approach stands in stark contrast to conventional educational practice, which he referred to as the "banking approach" to education. Freire has been able to draw upon and weave together a number of strands of thinking about educational practice and liberation .His theoretical innovations have had a considerable impact on the development of educational practice all over the world.

Keywords: *Colonisation,Banking Education, Reflection, Culture, Codifications, Praxis*.

Education confers knowledge and banishes ignorance. Because knowledge is power, education thus confers power. This implies that whoever controls education also controls power. Education means the varied options, strategies, and ways through which people come to learn, know, and understand their world and act within it. Schooling, on the other hand, refers to formal schools, colleges, and universities and their rules and norms. Fanon (1963)

observes that the colonizer is not simply satisfied with holding the land and property of the colonized, but also engages in a kind of "perverted logic" that distorts, disfigures, and destroys the past of colonized people. It is this "perverted logic" that needs to be challenged in the academy. Dei (2000) observes that one way to resist hegemonic knowledge is through decentring the school curricula and centring Indigenous knowledge. He further argues that if colonized educators fail to resist the continued marginalization and negation of local people's knowledge and experience, they also become accomplices to colonialism. By the power that the colonizers wield, they imposed their image of superiority on the psyche of the colonized. When Lamming (1991) laments: "Europe had trained black men to wear those white masks", he was invariably suggesting that colonial language could be an effective ideological weapon to disempower colonized subjects from knowledge being produced and validated in their own environment. Consequently, when words prefixed with *black* (blackmail, black-sheep, blackmagic, black-market, black-joke*)* are interpreted to mean something negative; whereas when words prefixed with *white* (white-collar-jobs, white-magic, white-power*)* are coded to mean positive things, a subtle way to privilege whiteness and de-privilege blackness occurs. Little doubt, White superiority has been gradually internalized in Ghana to the extent that Ghanaian parents always refer to their successful children as *"me broni"* (my White child).

The process of producing knowledge is also a process of making politics. If knowledge is power, then decolonizing knowledge production is also a process of challenging the dominant power. Therefore, individuals engaging in the project of decolonizing the academy need to assess themselves if they are ready to face the consequences of their actions. Spivak (1990) has rightly warned that the task of changing the academy is difficult and only when one begins to take a whack at shaking the structure, one sees how the opposition is well consolidated.

Decolonising the Mind: The battle over language is an important part of the larger battle over knowledge and power. According to Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, an African writer, "Africa is made to believe that it needs Europe to rescue it from poverty" while in reality Africa enriches Europe (and America) with all of its natural and human resources. By examining the history of Kenya and other African colonies, Ngugi shows that when Christian missionaries and other European colonizers entered Africa, they forced Africans to speak European languages as a means of enforcing their control. They set up schools that taught children European languages while deprecating the use of native languages. Language became a means of separating children from their own culture and history. While at home, children

were taught about their ancestry from their parents through oral stories, at school they learned to criticize their native cultures if they wanted to become "civilized" and gain the favor of the "White man's God." Ngugi insists that African writers must write the correct stories of their people in their native languages using African forms so that future generations learn the true traditions that existed. Ngugi feels African intellectuals who primarily speak and write European languages perpetuate the idea of the needy Africa that requires aid from Europe to survive. Ngugi wrote his early novels in English. However, after realizing the implications of his actions, he decided to produce literature only in Gikuyu. In addition, his stories and plays utilize African elements of writing and include traditional song and dance, ceremonies, movement, and nuances. Ngugi asserts that "African writers are bound by [their] calling to do for [their] languages what Spencer, Milton and Shakespeare did for English; what Pushkin and Tolstoy did for Russian; indeed what all writers in world history have done for their languages by meeting the challenge of creating a literature in them". Even when Ngugi's work is translated into English, he demands that Gikuyu terms remain in the text to maintain authenticity As a matter of fact postcolonial literature is not simply a writing that emerges as the break-up of the colonial empire, but such a writing that critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship Postcolonial is conceived in reference to three conditions:

As independence after the departure of colonial countries.

As the political and cultural movement challenging the received histories.

As a position that calls for a major rethinking of pre-given categories, histories and traditions in order to be able to live successfully within the cultural ambiguity that characterizes many African nations in the wake of colonization. The postcolonial concern is with the power that resides in discourse and textuality. This stands good for the East African writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o who seems to believe in the saying that pen is mightier than the sword in the neo-colonial setup. To give expression to colonized experience, postcolonial writers sought to undercut thematically and formally the discourses which supported the myths of power, the race classifications, and the imagery of subordination in the era of colonization. Ngugi takes great pain in showing how ordinary people, particularly in Kenya, are trapped in their own complex motives and values, which pushes them to sudden acts of cowardice or courage. Ngugi's fiction remains a quest for identity, emphasizing the fact that decolonization is a psychological process, advocating freedom rather than the geographical freedom. . In *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), Ngugi argues that when African writers produce texts in English, French, German, Portuguese, or any other European language, they are writing in the languages of their oppressors. He feels they are

giving up their cultural independence and abandoning the languages used by the people of their nations. He wants these languages preserved to pass down to new generations the traditions and customs of their cultures. Ngugi is an opponent of the current global spread of English and argues that this language is a form of linguistic imperialism. He is of the view that this language expansion should be halted, especially in postcolonial countries where English was previously language of oppression. Ngugi's basic premise is that colonialism persists today, less visibly though insidiously, as a form of cultural and linguistic invasion. He states that hegemony is achieved through education, schools, church and political system.

Ngugi's exhortation on using native languages as the indispensable medium of his writings is not only a reaction against Anglicization, but it is more about resurrecting the African soul from slavery, denigration and imperialism. Ngugi argues that writing in native languages is a mandatory step towards cultural identity, cultural renaissance and destruction of imperialist tradition. For Ngugi, attacking language means attacking or ruining people's memory bank. Ngugi highlights importance of language, as a means of communication as well as an agent that carries the weight of civilization. Dismemberment of Africans is made possible solely through the weapons of language, religion and education. He writes well: *The bullet was the means of physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation… the physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom. But where the former was visibly brutal, the latter was visibly gentle.* (Ngugi, *Decolonizing)* Ngugi emphasizes that language is the carrier of culture and culture cannot be separated from language. It is through language that culture develops, articulates and transmits itself from one generation to another. Language carries the images of the world contained in the culture by written literature or orature. Ngugi puts: *Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world.* The colonizers are putting the knife upon this harmony between native languages and culture by imposing their languages on natives. Through this, colonizers desire to control the *"entire realm of the language of real life".* Through language, the colonizers are controlling the mental universe of the colonized because they know that their control cannot be effective and complete without mental control. For "mental colonization," it is necessary because *"to control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others… The domination of a people's language by their culture and languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized".*

This imposition and elevation of foreign languages lead to the destruction of people's culture, art, dance, religion, history, education, orature and literature. Even in schools, English is considered the main language and it is used to break the harmony with the mother language. Due to this *"learning, for a colonial child, became a cerebral activity and not an emotionally felt experience"* . This leads to total divorce between the written language taught in school and language spoken at home. The harmony with the native language is broken, and this results in colonial alienation. This alienation is enhanced by keeping Europe as the centre of the universe and colonial child is made to look upon him from the European point of view. They look at the world from Euro-centric point of view and it appears to them *"the earth moved around the European intellectual scholarly axis".* African languages are forbidden in schools and are considered inferior in comparison to European languages. Ngugi's philosophy of culture and decolonization is not only a powerful symbolic form of cultural empowerment but it is also an articulate socio-political counter-discourse to hegemonic notions of culture. Also, it can be said that a significant part of wa Thiongo's outlook has been transformed by some of the changes in the global ideological structure. Ngugi wa Thiongo begins by operating within the classic colonial structure based on the colonized/colonizer divide. Needless to add, in transcending the paradigm of conventional colonial relations, wa Thiongo foregrounds a discourse of multiculturalism and manages to articulate a new politics of inclusiveness.

Pedagogy of the *Oppressed:* At a time when memory is being erased and the political relevance of education is dismissed in the language of measurement and quantification, it is all the more important to remember the legacy and work of Paulo Freire. Freire is one of the most important educators of the 20th century and is considered one of the most important theorists of "critical pedagogy" - the educational movement guided by both passion and principle to help students develop a consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, empower the imagination, connect knowledge and truth to power and learn to read both the word and the world as part of a broader struggle for agency, justice and democracy. Paulo Freire's work reveals the political nature of education and the educational nature of politics. If we start with the former, Freire argued that there is no such thing as neutral education. For Freire, the role of education is central in the reproduction of capitalist social relations. Freire believed that education, in the broadest sense, was eminently political because it offered students the conditions for self-reflection, a self-managed life and critical agency. For Freire, pedagogy was central to a formative culture that makes both critical consciousness and social action possible. Pedagogy in this sense connected learning to social

change; it was a project and provocation that challenged students to critically engage with the world so they could act on it. What Freire made clear is that pedagogy at its best is not about training in techniques and methods, nor does it involve coercion or political indoctrination. Indeed, far from a mere method or an a priori technique to be imposed on all students, education is a political and moral practice that provides the knowledge, skills and social relations that enable students to explore for themselves the possibilities of what it means to be engaged citizens, while expanding and deepening their participation in the promise of a substantive democracy. According to Freire, critical pedagogy afforded students the opportunity to read, write and learn from a position of agency - to engage in a culture of questioning that demands far more than competency in rote learning and the application of acquired skills. Freire's philosophy of education is not a simple method but rather an organic political consciousness. The domination of some by others must be overcome, in his view, so that the humanization of all can take place. Authoritarian forms of education, in serving to reinforce the oppressors' view of the world, and their material privilege in it, constitute an obstacle to the liberation of human beings. The means of this liberation is a praxis, or process of action and reflection, that simultaneously names reality and acts to change it. Freire criticized views that emphasized either the objective or subjective aspect of social transformation, and insisted that revolutionary change takes place precisely through the consistency of a critical commitment in both word and deed. This dialectical unity is expressed in his formulation, "To speak a true word is to transform the world."Freire's revolutionary pedagogy starts from a deep love for, and humility before poor and oppressed people, and a respect for their "common sense," which constitutes knowledge no less important than the scientific knowledge of the professional. This humility makes possible a condition of reciprocal trust and communication between the educator, who also learns, and the student, who also teaches. Thus, education becomes a "communion" between participants in a mutually informing dialogue, rather than the unilateral action of one for the benefit of the other. Nevertheless, this does not amount to a celebration of the consciousness of the oppressed, in which the educator recedes into the background as a mere facilitator. Freire conceived of authentic teaching as enacting a clear authority, rather than being authoritarian. The teacher, in his conception, is not neutral, but intervenes in the educational situation in order to help the student to overcome those aspects of his or her world view that are paralyzing, and to learn to think critically.

Freire criticized prevailing forms of education as reducing students to the status of passive objects to be acted upon by the teacher. In this traditional form of education it is the job of the teacher to deposit in the minds of the students, considered to be empty in an absolute ignorance, the bits of information that constitute knowledge. Freire called this banking education. The goal of banking education is to immobilize the people within existing frameworks of power by conditioning them to accept that meaning and historical agency are the sole property of the oppressor. Within this system, the oppressed are characterized as marginal, pathological, and helpless. In the banking model, knowledge is taken to be a gift that is bestowed upon the student by the teacher. This false generosity on the part of the oppressor, which ostensibly aims to incorporate and improve the oppressed, is in fact a crucial means of domination. Against the banking model, Freire proposed a dialogical problem- posing method of education. In this model, the teacher and student become co-investigators of knowledge and of the world. Instead of suggesting to students that their situation in society has been fixed by nature or reason, as the banking model does, Freire's problem-posing education invites the oppressed to explore their reality as a "problem" to be transformed. The content of this education cannot be determined in advance, through the expertise of the educator, but must instead arise from the lived reality of the students. It is not the task of the educator to provide the answer to the problems that these situations present, but to help students to achieve a form of critical thinking that will make possible an awareness of society as mutable. Once they are able to see the world as a transformable limit situation, rather than an unthinkable and inescapable stasis, it becomes possible for students to imagine a new and different reality. In order, however, to undertake this process, the oppressed must challenge their own internalization of the oppressor. The oppressed are accustomed to thinking of themselves as "less than." They have been conditioned to view as complete and human only the dominating practices of the oppressor, so that to fully become human means to simulate these practices. The concrete basis for Freire's dialogical system of education is the culture circle, in which students and coordinator together discuss generative themes that have significance within the context of students' lives. These themes, which are related to nature, culture, work and relationships, are discovered through the cooperative research of educators and students. They express, in an open rather than propagandistic fashion, the principal contradictions that confront the students in their world. These themes are then represented in the form of codifications (usually visual representations) which are taken as the basis for dialogue within the circle. As students decode these representations, they recognize them as situations in which they themselves are involved as subjects. Learning

to read the codifications in their situationality, rather than simply experiencing them, initiates the process of critical consciousness formation and makes possible the intervention by students in society. As the culture circle comes to recognize the need for print literacy, the visual codifications are accompanied by words to which they correspond. Students learn to read these words in the process of reading the aspects of the world with which they are linked. For Freire, authentic education is always a "practice of freedom" rather than an alienating inculcation of skills.

Conclusion: “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” From the perspective of this exploratory model, we can speculate that the nature and process of this corruption is due to the loss of two fundamentally human characteristics, perception and empathy. When these are lost, the door is open for the abuse and criminal exploitation of those denied power, but there is a remarkable mechanism of hope built into this process that is seldom recognized. Oppressed persons need not be seen solely as helpless victims. They often possess a very powerful and admirable ability that develops through their hardship and strife, even though they may not be aware of it. Although their lives become ruled by harsh realities that can be discouraging and depressing, their ticket to liberation and empowerment is through the often raw and penetrating perception that develops out of their painful experience. In his non-fictional work *decolonizing the Mind;* Ngugi wa Thiong’o proposes a program of radical decolonization. He emphasizes out the way in which the language of Afro-European literature manifests the dominance of the empire. Ngugi champions a complete return to native languages. He speaks of ‘linguicide’ and ‘linguifam’ and points an accusing finger at the dominance of English language in the current era of globalization. Freire both revolutionized the ways education was conceptualized and changed perceptions concerning how students should be taught. He advocated an egalitarian system in which collaboration replaced hierarchical teaching models. This involves the parties gaining knowledge from each other, each being equally enriched by the other’s perceptions, knowledge, and experiences. After analysing thoughts of Freire and Ngugui it can be said that a simplified decolonising framework would be to assist students to think and navigate through complex and contested knowledge spaces on their way to understanding Indigenous worldviews, colonial experiences, contemporary dilemmas, and future goals. Instead of teaching students to ‘resist’ Western inscriptions of the Indigenous and take up Indigenous ones, we should students to think about the limits of current language and discourse for navigating the complexities of knowledge production. A rationale that focuses on revealing the politics of knowledge production in Indigenous Studies – one that makes spaces for the

exploration of ideas, that insists on critical reflection on the limits of all thinking on both sides, and that requires the development of better language for navigating such intricate and complex entanglements of meaning -provides good grounds for teaching both non-Indigenous and Indigenous students together. They need more than analytical and language tools for simple critique and a decolonising framework that slips them too quickly across the Western-Indigenous binary. Can they hope to be liberated? That is a question that requires further consideration if we do not want them to be the captives of the limits of our current propositions of decolonisation.

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